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ABSTRACT

Many young adults are not politically active. Since 1972, their participation and interest levels have declined not only in absolute terms but also relative to other voting-age groups. This paper examines how the Internet can reverse this trend. It focuses on how leading news and political information Web sites affected young adults during the closing weeks of the 2000 presidential election campaign. The data come from a survey that exposes citizens to Web sites under varying conditions. The data are used to document how individual sites change viewers' political interest and likely participation levels. Seemingly similar sites had dramatically different effects on young viewers. The analysis documents that sites which provide information effectively increase political interest and participation for all ages, but young and old differ significantly on which sites are effective. Findings suggest that using the Internet to increase youth political engagement entails unique, but discoverable, challenges. (Contains 21 references, 7 notes, and 4 tables.) (Author/BT)

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More Than Kids Stuff: Can News and Information Web Sites Mobilize Young Adults?

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More Than Kids Stuff:
Can News and Information Web Sites Mobilize Young Adults?

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Abstract

Many young adults are not active politically. Since 1972, matters have only gotten worse -- the participation and interest levels of people ages 18 to 24 have declined farther and faster than any other voting-age group. We examine whether the Internet can reverse this trend.

We focus on how nine news and political information websites affected young adults during the closing weeks of the 2000 presidential election campaign. Our data come from a web-based survey instrument that randomly exposed nearly 1200 respondents to one or more of the nine sites. We use the survey to document how individual sites affect political interest and participation.

We discover that seemingly similar sites have distinct effects on young adults. Part of the explanation for this difference has nothing to do with age. We find that if respondents of any age perceive a site to provide information effectively, it is much more likely to increase their political interest and participation. Age matters, however, because young and old disagree about which sites are effective. Specifically, young adults make strong distinctions between sites in our sample that many observers, and older respondents in our study, treat as interchangeable. Our work shows that using the Internet to increase young adults' political engagement entails unique, but discoverable, challenges.

Running Head: Can News Web Sites Mobilize Young Adults?

Keywords: Political Participation, Internet, media effects, Internet surveys, political web sites.

Democracies draw at least part of their legitimacy from the premise that all citizens are eligible to participate in the political process. While citizens are not obliged to devote time and energy to politics, many observers argue that the polity benefits when more citizens are politically engaged (see, e.g., Mansbridge 1999). Despite the broad acceptance of such ideals, not all politically relevant groups act accordingly.

The youngest voting age Americans are far less active in politics than other age groups. Their propensity to vote, low since the first days of voting rights for 18 year olds, continues to decline. In 1972, 49.6 percent of 18-24 year olds reported voting, compared to 42.2 percent in 1976, 39.9 percent in 1980, 40.8 in 1984, 36.3 percent in 1988, 32.4 percent in 1996 and 32.3 percent in 2000.[1] While other age groups' voting rates have also fallen in recent years, no other decline is as severe.

Our youngest eligible voters are also increasingly disinterested in politics. Using data from "The American Freshman," Soule (2001: 4) reports that

> "Over the past forty years, no generation has begun with such low levels of interest in politics. Cross-sectional surveys of incoming freshmen reveal that only 26% consider it very important or essential to keep up to date with political affairs. This is a near record low, in contrast to over 50% of students prior to 1970 and 42% in 1990."

Delli Carpini (2000) argues that such trends are due to young adults' lack of motivation, opportunities, and ability to participate effectively. Specifically,

> ...most of the formal institutions of public life either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them or are ill equipped to attract young adults and provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate. Parties and candidates see little reason to devote their resources to reaching out to young Americans given that this age cohort is less likely to vote than older Americans. Government officials are unlikely to listen to young Americans, knowing there is little risk that they will be punished for their neglect at the polls. The news media is aimed at an older and increasingly shrinking audience. Traditional civic organizations and

[1] Source: U.S. Census Bureau Table A-1. Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex and Age Groups. Internet Release date: February 27, 2002. Revised on June 3, 2002.

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> interest groups are dominated by issues, governing structures, policy solutions, and/or civic styles that are anathema to younger Americans raised in a faster-paced, entrepreneurial, mass-mediated, and global environment (Delli Carpini 2000: 344).

Other observers point to growing levels of cynicism about politics and cultural trends that reduce the value of citizen duty (Hays 1998).

This confluence of factors corresponds to a downward trend in political participation and interest among young adults, relative to older age groups now and to the same age cohort in generations past. Many find the trend alarming. Some try to stop or slow it. Their efforts show that if politics are presented in particular ways, young adults can be mobilized.

The 1992 presidential election is a case in point. In 1988, 36.3% of 18-24 year olds reported voting. In 1992, this number increased to 42.8% (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). Some observers tie this increase to Democratic nominee Bill Clinton's targeted mobilization effort. During this campaign that Clinton made the unprecedented moves of playing his saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, a popular program among younger viewers, and being the first presidential candidate to make extensive use of MTV.

While 1992 implies that the negative trend in youth participation is reversible, 1996 reveals the fragile nature of such changes. In that year, the young cohort's participation rate dropped back to 32.4% -- a figure consistent with the overall trend in post-1972 youth participation rates.

Can negative trends in young adults' political interest and participation be slowed or reversed? While age-specific differences in life circumstances make it unlikely that young adults will ever participate in numbers approaching those of older citizens, it may be possible to close the gap or at least slow the rate at which it is widening. If Delli

Carpini (2000) is correct that a lack of attention from the political mainstream and lack of opportunities to participate contribute to low participation, then it is worth examining how formal institutions of public life can be redesigned to create more mainstream attention, new participatory opportunities, and a more engaged young citizenry.

For this reason, we examine the Internet. The Internet is a formal institution of public life that is associated with not only great potential for social change but also substantial uncertainty and skepticism about its effectiveness. In what follows, we seek to clarify an important aspect of its potential.

The Internet seems to be a prime vehicle through which the participation-reducing forces that Delli Carpini names can be countered. Many households have Internet access. According to the 2000 American National Election Study, 63 percent of the electorate had Internet access. And among those aged 18-24, approximately 80 percent were online. At the same time, the breadth of the Internet continues to increase, including its political space. Internet viewers have instant access to content from many news organizations, political campaigns, public interest groups and government agencies.

The Internet's potential to increase political participation comes from the fact that it allows people to post, at a minimal cost, content that can be viewed a broad audiences. It facilitates mixing text and audiovisual information in ways that can increase interest in, and sharpen memories of, the content (Graber 2001). Moreover, it provides a cost-effective way to tailor multi-media participatory appeals to target audiences, including young adults. But how this audience will respond to such appeals is an open question.

We examine how this new medium increases young adults' political interest and participation. Unlike many existing studies, however, "the Internet" is not our unit of

observation. The reason is that people do not interact with the Internet as a whole; instead, they usually interact with one web page at a time. There are billions of web pages, thousands of which are devoted to politics and billions of which cover other topics. No citizen can view them all. They must choose. This fact orients our study. We proceed on the premise that if a story on a site such as Project Vote Smart or CNN.com is to cause a young person to be more interested in politics, the person must choose viewing the story over everything else they can do and the story must change their views in a particular way. Therefore, knowing how web sites change their viewers is a critical part of determining how "the Internet" affects political participation. Such an endeavor requires new methods, and we provide them.

Our study focuses on how leading news and political information websites affected young voters during the closing weeks of the 2000 presidential election campaign. Our primary source of data is an unusual web-based survey. In the survey, a randomization device sent each of our nearly 1200 respondents (themselves randomly selected through a national RDD sampling procedure) to one of nine news and information web sites. An interesting aspect of this procedure is that most of our subjects were exposed to news and information sites that they had never viewed before. This approach allows us to evaluate hypotheses about site-specific effects that are impossible for most existing "politics and internet" studies.

Our main null hypotheses are "News and information web sites do not affect young adults' political interest and activity" and "All such sites have indistinguishable effects on younger and older adults." We reject both hypotheses soundly. Indeed, we find that seemingly similar web sites differ in the extent to which they affect young adults'

political interest and participation. Subsequent analysis yields a two-step explanation for the difference. First, and regardless of age, when viewers rate a site as providing "new information" effectively (i.e., quickly, easily, and accurately), they are more likely to report increased interest and desire to participate in politics. Second, young and old have very different views of which sites have these attributes. Put another way, once young adults judge a political news site to be effective, it affects their political engagement no differently than other age groups, but young and old do not judge sites in the same way. The main implication is that a set of web sites that are treated as interchangeable by many observers, as well as many of the older adults in our study, affect young adults in a distinct way. If the finding is true generally, an improved understanding of these differences can help people who want to increase participation craft more effective web-based appeals.

The paper continues as follows. First, we review ideas about how mass media affects political participation. Then, we describe our data and methods. Next, we present preliminary findings on how young adults' interest in news and political web sites relates to those of older citizens. Then, we compare how individual sites affect young and old. A concluding section discusses practical implications.

Previous Research

Since web sites are a relatively new communicative medium, there is little published research on how they affect political interest and participation.[2] There is,

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[2] A wide range of observers are concerned that Internet use contributes to greater isolation and less interest in social phenomena (see, e.g., Sunstein 2001). However, scientific evidence for or against such conclusions is scant. One recent publication, by Althaus and Tewksbury (2000), finds that "the Web supplements traditional news media" and that "using the Web as a source of news may be positively related to reading printed newspapers..." However, such publications -- with scientific methods at their core -- remain few in number.

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however, a sizeable and relevant literature on media effects. We begin our brief review of relevant ideas there.

This literature is divided between scholars who believe media increases engagement (e.g., Norris 1996; Pinkelton and Austin 1998) and those who believe that media usage depresses political engagement (e.g., Patterson 1993; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Putnam 2000). Taken together, the evidence suggests that it is not the media *per se*, but the content of the information being transmitted. For instance, Pippa Norris (1996), in *Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam*, argues "the relationship between civic engagement and television viewership is more complex than sometimes suggested" (Norris 1996, 479). Using data from the 1990 American Civic Participation Study, Norris finds that the number of hours a person watches television is negatively correlated with political knowledge and interest, but positively related to political efficacy. Simultaneously, she finds that watching television news and public affairs shows is associated with increased levels of political engagement, while reading the newspaper corresponds to higher levels of all three measures of political engagement.

Research in the area of media use and political engagement suggests that the effect of media exposure is not only contingent on content, but also tone. For instance, in an experimental study of the effects of campaign advertising, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) found that negative political advertising depressed intentions to vote, confidence in government, and political efficacy. Relative to those scores of individuals exposed to positive ads, vote intentions were 4.6 percentage points lower for subjects who viewed a negative version of an experimentally manipulated ad. These subjects were also less likely to express confidence in government or to feel that their vote counted.

Others focus on how framing affects media effects. A focal concept in such research is whether or not the media uses game-centered frames when covering political campaigns. Cappella and Jamieson (1997), for example, examined whether strategic framing of broadcast news coverage would increase cynicism about a campaign. Relative to those subjects exposed to issue-centered coverage or no news coverage of a campaign, they found greater cynicism in subjects exposed to the strategic framing coverage (see also Graber 1984; Patterson 1993).

A unifying theme of this work is that critical insights about the effect of any communications medium on political participation requires more a study of "newspapers" or "television" in general. Instead, such insights come from documenting and comparing how specific kinds of content affect individuals. In such studies, important causal properties reveal themselves and teach us that "media effects" tend to be conditional on contextual and content-based factors.

Turning to the Internet, scholarly research on how web sites affect political interest and participation is limited. In our attempt to conduct such research, we have gleaned important background knowledge from a complementary body of descriptive research. This research uses national surveys to demonstrate that many people use the Internet for political purposes. Larsen and Rainie (2002), for example, extrapolate from a survey of 2000 Americans to conclude that "42 million Americans have used government Web sites to research public policy issues. 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices. 14 million have used government Web sites to gather information to help them decide how to cast their votes," and "13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns." (Larsen and Rainie 2002: 2).

Such results suggest that the Internet is an important means by which citizens interact with, and learn about, politics. However, not all citizens take equal advantage of the opportunity. Larsen and Rainie find while "...it is often assumed that activism online is an activity for young Americans, our survey shows that those ages 18-29 are the least likely to have used the Internet in overtly political or activist ways." (Larsen and Rainie 2002: 9).

Young people do, however, use the Internet for purposes not entirely disconnected from politics. Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis (2001: 35) report that "the Internet has replaced the library as the primary tool for doing research for significant projects." They also find that "More than two-thirds (68%) of youth ages 12 through 17 have searched for news online. Older teens are more likely to look for news with 73% of then reporting ever having done that activity, compared to 63% of teens ages 12 through 14. Teens and adults are just as likely (68% to 66%) to have ever checked the news or current events online" (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis. 2001: 39). Such studies suggest that Internet viewing can affect political interest and participation. However, they are not designed to clarify when or why. Such questions motivate us to conduct a different kind of analysis.

Data

Our data, a national web-based poll and a corresponding local study, comes from research commissioned by the Markle Foundation and conducted by Arthur Lupia during the final weeks of the 2000 presidential campaign. The focal point of the research is the Web White & Blue Network 2000. This Markle project was a non-partisan consortium of 17 of the largest Internet news and news organizations. These groups came together to highlight the Internet's potential to expand citizen participation and to obtain access to

election-related content that would have been impossible or more costly to obtain on their own. The sites were ABCNews.com, America Online, Excite, CNN.com, FOXNews.com, I-Village.com, MSN.com, MSNBC.com, Netnoir.com, MTV.com, NPR.com, The New York Times on the web, Oxygen.com, PBS.com, WashingtonPost.com, USAToday.com, and Yahoo.com.[3] In addition, a site called webwhiteandblue.org directed users to innovative and important campaign content. The site, which received over 7.5 million page views from June 28, 2002 to Election Day, contained a daily selection of links to online political information from the 17 charter sites, a Featured Non-Profit Site of the Week, and a unique and widely-used directory of state-by-state election information. Our data focuses on a few of the network's sites, plus other leading public interest sites such as vote-smart.org.[4]

Our web-based poll provides a direct view of a site affects a large and diverse group of individuals. It has the same basic structure as a telephone-based public opinion survey, obtaining respondent names from nationally focused RDD sampling procedure.[5]

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[3] The project's centerpiece, the Rolling Cyber Debate, is an example of what this unique collaboration was able to accomplish. The Rolling Cyber Debate was the first-ever online presidential debate. It ran from October 1 through November 8, 2000 and was carried simultaneously on the 17 sites on the Web White & Blue network. The presidential campaigns of George W. Bush, Al Gore, Pat Buchanan, Harry Browne, Howard Phillips and John Hagelin participated. Ralph Nader declined. The individual sites benefited from this project in many ways, not the least of which was being able to brand the content of this exchange as their own. For more information, visit WWB.org, which contains an archive of its activities in 2000.

[4] The study was not designed with our present research question in mind. Rather, it was designed to obtain some insights about the effect of the Web White and Blue Network. This is motivated by our concerns about youth participation and our observation that the oversample of young adults in the local study and their non-trivial numbers in the Knowledge Networks data could help uncover important aspects of how leading news web sites affect youth political behavior. Lupia (2001) and Lupia and Baird (2002) contain different analyses of this data that focus on the broader effects of endeavors such as Web White and Blue.

[5] Knowledge Networks respondents have free Internet access as a consequence of agreeing to be in the panel. We therefore expect them to be more frequent users of the Internet than the American population at large. While we are mindful of this fact when drawing inferences, we also contend that its effect on our inferences is not likely to be great. Knowledge Networks stakes its reputation on drawing an otherwise representative sample, and leading researchers not affiliated with the company have judged the quality of their sample to be at least as good as many phone surveys (Krosnick and Chang 2001). Moreover, the goal of our research is not to characterize the American public at large. Rather it is to clarify what happens to people of specific age groups

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The key difference is that the format allows respondents to view web sites during the interview. Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, CA conducted this study. They interviewed 1199 Americans between October 13 and November 6, 2000.

Following large-scale experimental design principles articulated by Sniderman and Grob (1996), they selected each respondent randomly and without prejudice to whether or not they had used, or even heard of, the sites in which we were interested. Independent randomization procedures determined which web site or sites respondents ere asked to view. This analytic design allows us to clarify why some sites were, or could be, more effective than others at increasing political interest and participation.

We use the local study to evaluate the robustness of a key finding in the Knowledge Networks data. The study was conducted at the University of California, San Diego from October 16 to November 4, 2000. We recruited subjects with advertisements in campus newspapers and flyers posted throughout the campus. We conducted the study in a laboratory with 25 computer terminals, and paid subjects $35 for participating in a 1-hour session. In the middle of the session, subjects were instructed to use a list of web sites to "learn as much as they can about the upcoming presidential election." We administered questionnaires before and after the viewing period, and recorded important aspects of their viewing behaviors, to gauge the viewing session's effect. The key element of the study design for our purpose it oversamples 18 to 24 year olds.

Results

Our first result documents the extent to which young adults' use of the political Internet differs from that of other age groups. It also sets up our null hypotheses.

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after they encounter a specific site. Therefore, the respondents' Internet access is an asset and Knowledge Networks' sampling procedures are sufficient to provide us with the age distribution we need.

At the beginning of the Knowledge Networks study, we asked "Do you ever get any kind of news online?" For those who answered "yes," we followed with questions about the frequency of the named activity. We then repeated the sequence of questions replacing the phrase "any kind of news" with "news or information about politics or the presidential campaign." Table 1 displays responses to these questions. An example of how to read the table is as follows: Of the 70 respondents aged 18-24, 69% had obtained news online. This compares to 79% of our 849 respondents aged 25-54 and 73% of our 279 respondents over 55.

[Table 1 here.]

Table 1 reveals that young adults are less likely than older adults to:

- **go online for general news (question 1a),**
- **seek general news frequently if ever they go online to do so (1b, 1c),**
- **seek political news if ever they seek online news (% to 2a/% yes to 1a), and**
- **seek political news more than once every few weeks if they seek such news at all (2b, 2c).**

These findings reinforce the common stereotype of younger citizens as relative "slackers" when it comes to politics. It also shows that the mere availability of Internet access is not sufficient to increase young adults' political interest or participation.

That the Internet, when described as a single entity, is not sufficient to induce greater participation is not a new insight. Such findings, however, are orthogonal to questions about whether, and for whom, a particular site makes a difference. So while many Internet and politics studies conclude with the kinds of results displayed in Table 1, we turn to what happens when people interact with individual sites.

The defining feature of our Knowledge Networks data is that it comes from an interview that is interrupted. It begins by asking the standard questions about Internet usage described above. Then, a random number generator determines which version of the question "Have you ever heard of [SITE]?" each respondent receives. Those who answer "yes" are also asked "Do you ever go onto [SITE] to get news and information on the presidential campaign?" After answering these questions, and without warning, respondents receive the following message:

> Now we are going to send you to [SITE]. For the next five minutes, we would like you to use this site to learn about the candidates in the presidential campaign. At the end of the five-minute session, this interview will resume and we will ask you questions about it.

453 respondents were interrupted once, 746 were interrupted twice. For all respondents who were interrupted once, SITE=webwhiteandblue.org.[6] All respondents who were interrupted a second time viewed a site randomly selected from the following group: cnn.com, foxnews.com, isyndicate.com, politics.Yahoo.com, politicalinformation.com, nyt.com (The New York Times on the Web), usatoday.com, vote-smart.org. The number of sites used was limited by the combination of our sample size and our desire to have at least 75 respondents view each site. The main criteria for choosing the sites were: that most – but not all -- be part of the Web White and Blue Network, that they vary in whether they were commercial or non-profit in origin, and that that they vary in whether respondents are likely to have heard of or used them.

After each viewing session, we asked respondents to agree or disagree with a set of statements. Some statements sought *site evaluations*, such as "I can use [SITE] to get

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[6] The rationale for this choice is one of efficacy. While the Markle Foundation organized the Web White and Blue Network, the only site whose content it controlled was WWB.org. Therefore, we were asked to gather large amounts of data on wwb.org because lessons learned about its impact could be implemented directly.

the information I want quickly and easily." Others probed *personal impact* – different aspects of whether the site changed respondents' political interest or willingness to participate. Our personal impact questions asked whether the site made respondents "feel more confident about the quality of political information available on the Internet", "want to learn more about politics", "more likely to talk about politics", "more likely to vote in the November election" and "more certain about who I will vote for in the presidential election." Each of these questions refers to either a participatory act (e.g., increased learning, talking, or voting) or a factor that can make future political participation more rewarding (e.g., greater confidence or certainty).

Table 2 summarizes responses to our questions. To simplify the table, we sort the sites into three categories: WWB, youth-preferred sites and baseline sites. We put WWB.org into its own category because everyone viewed it. By contrast, the number of respondents viewing the preferred and baseline sites ranged from 76 to 110 with a mean of 93.3. The categories "preferred" and "baseline" are based on a distinct pattern in the data -- there were two sets of sites for which 18-24 year olds gave distinct responses. *Preferred* sites received many more positive responses than *baseline* sites. However, within each set of sites, responses were very similar. The *preferred* sites are Vote-Smart, Yahoo, CNN, and FoxNews. The *baseline* sites are I-Syndicate, PoliticalInformation, New York Times, and USAToday. Note that treating WWB as a preferred site would increase the strength of our subsequent claims, however, since we have so many observations on that site we feel it important to show that our findings are not an artifact of this particular site.

[Table 2 here.]

Table 2 provides evidence against both of our null hypotheses. Against the null hypothesis "News and information web sites cannot increase young adults' political interest and activity," Table 2 shows large percentages responding affirmatively to each personal impact question. It is worthwhile to note that this effect comes despite the fact that most respondents had not ever before used the site we exposed them to. The first two rows of cell entries in Table 1 show that over half of our respondents viewed a site that they had never heard of before and over 90% viewed a site that they had never used before for the purpose of getting election information. Therefore, the positive impact observed throughout Table 2 is not an artifact of people saying nice things about sites they like. To the contrary, these results suggest that mere exposure to unfamiliar sites can play an important role in political mobilization. But these effects are not uniform across Table 2, which brings us to our second null hypothesis.

Against the hypothesis, "All news and information web sites have indistinguishable effects on younger and older adults," Table 2 also shows important variations. Focusing first on the youngest respondents, we see that young WWB.org and "preferred site" viewers reacted to the site evaluation and personal impact questions differently than did young "baseline site" viewers. Fifty to seventy-eight percent of young WWB or preferred site viewers responded affirmatively to our personal impact questions whereas only 6 to 41 percent of young "baseline site" viewers gave such responses. Indeed, young "baseline site" adults always responded less affirmatively than the other young adults.

More interesting, however, is how these responses compare to those of older adults. *For every site evaluation and personal impact question, young adults draw*

distinctions between the preferred and baseline sites that older adults do not. The large bold cell entries in Table 2 show that young adult site evaluations, and the sites' subsequent personal impact on their political interest and participation, are distinct.

For example, the first personal impact question asks for responses to "[Site] makes me feel more confident about the quality of political information available on the Internet." Young adults who viewed WWB or a preferred site were more likely to respond that viewing WWB or a preferred site increased their confidence about finding quality information on the Internet than were older adults who viewed the same sites. At the same time, young adults were less likely than older adults to agree with the statement after viewing one of the "baseline" sites.

A similar pattern occurs throughout Table 2, as the cell entries in the columns labeled "Boost" demonstrate. This statistic is the percentage of respondents who viewed preferred sites saying "agree" or "strongly agree" *minus* the percentage of "baseline" site viewers giving the same response. It measures the extra boost on a particular question that preferred sites generate relative to baseline sites. In Table 2, this statistic shows that whether a young person views a preferred site or a baseline site corresponds to a big difference in their site evaluations, political interest, and future political engagement. As respondents get older, the boost dissipates – for every variable in the table.

One of the biggest differences comes from one of the most important participatory questions "[Site1] makes me more likely to vote in the November election." Where only 6 percent of 18-24 year olds were more likely to vote after viewing the "baseline" sites, half reported being more likely after viewing the preferred sites. Older respondents drew little or no such distinctions in analogous comparisons.

Overall, Table 2 reveals that 18-24 year olds evaluate, and are personally impacted by, leading news and information web sites ways that other adults do not. Indeed, the disagreement between them and other age groups is substantial. Put another way, young adults draw strong distinctions between sites that many lay observers lump together and many older adults in our study treat as interchangeable.

Having shown that the least politically active voting-age cohort makes unique distinctions between news and information web sites prompts the question "What do these distinctions imply about which sites can induce young adults to be more interested and active in politics?" To address this question, we offer, as Table 3, two sets of regressions – one for WWB.org and the remaining eight sites. All variables in these regressions are scaled to [0, 1] to ease comparability of effects.

The dependent variables are responses to the *personal impact* questions from Table 2: SITE makes me feel *more confident* about the quality of political information available on the Internet, SITE makes me *want to learn more* about politics S makes me *more likely to talk* about politics with others, SITE makes me *more likely to vote* in the November election, and SITE makes me *more certain* about who I will vote for in the presidential election. Each variable is coded as 0 for the response "strongly disagree," .25 for the response "disagree," .75 for the response "agree," and 1 for the response "strongly agree."

The primary independent variables allow us to estimate how a respondent's age and evaluations affect a site's personal impact. Since our focus is on the difference between the youngest voting age cohort and others, our age variable is binary. It equals one if the subject is in the 18-24 year age cohort and zero otherwise. The three site

evaluation variables correspond to the three evaluative questions in Table 2: I can use [SITE] to find information that I have not seen elsewhere, I can use [SITE] to find information that is accurate and non-partisan, I can use [SITE] to get the information I want quickly and easily. We code these variables as we coded the dependent variables. To assess whether there is an age-specific effect of site evaluations on personal impact, we also include variables that interact the binary age and site evaluation measures.

Other independent variables clarify the effect of alternative explanations. The binary variables "newsOL" and "politicsOL" come from responses to the questions "Do you ever get any kind of news online?" and "Do you ever look for news or information about politics?" whose responses are in Table 1. They show the extent to which previous online news consumption affects the personal impact of our intervention. If you believe that previous exposures to online news should dampen the effect of the stimuli in our study, then these coefficients should be negative.

The binary variables "heard of" and "visited" come from responses to the pre-viewing questions featured in the top columns of Table 2. They show the extent to which prior knowledge or prior use of a site changes its effect on political interest and activity. If you believe that previous exposures to the specific sites we showed our respondents should dampen the personal impact of the exposures in our study, then these coefficients should be negative.

The variable "partisan" comes from standard questions asking respondents about the strength of their political partisanship. It equals 1 if they answer yes to a question asking if they identify with one of the major parties and also to a follow up about the strength of their party identification. The strength variable equals .67 if they identify with

a party but not strongly, .33 if they identify with neither party in the first question but lean towards one in a follow up given to such respondents and 0 if they neither identify with nor learn towards either party. We include this variable to account for the possibility that stronger partisans are already more motivated politically and, thus, less likely to be mobilized by a web site. The final independent variables capture residual site-specific effects. For this reason, we include dummy variables for all but one of the studied sites in the multi-site regression (the excluded category is I-syndicate).

[Table 3 here.]

The ten regressions displayed in Table 3 tell a common story. If respondents evaluate a site as an effective source of new information (i.e., it provides new information accurately, quickly, and easily), then viewing it corresponds to a significantly higher likelihood of increased political interest and participation than does viewing a site without these perceived attributes. Moreover, this explanation holds regardless of whether subjects are young and old – in no case is the interaction between a respondent's age and their response to a site evaluation question significant.

The only other factors whose coefficients are statistically significant with any regularity are having previously used the Internet to seek political news (politicsOL) and having viewed Project Vote-Smart's site, each of which is almost always positive. Those who previously sought political news online were more likely than others to credit a site for making them want to learn more, talk more and vote. This coefficient contradicts the idea that previous exposure to online news about elections would dampen the effect of the exposure in our study.[7]

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[7] An alternative explanation, though speculative given this data, is that such people are more interested in politics and, as a result, more appreciative of the content we showed them. Other analyses on this data (Lupia

When we combine the main theme of the Table 3 regressions with that of the previous tables, a clear pattern emerges. Once a respondent, regardless of age, judges a site as effective, viewing the site corresponds to greater political engagement. However, as Table 2 demonstrates, young and old differ in their judgments. Young adults draw big distinctions between preferred and baseline sites. Older adults do not make the same distinctions. There is an important interaction between site and age, but it occurs when the person makes judgments about the site -- once the judgment is made, age no longer affects the site's personal impact.

While the previous tables tell a consistent story, they are based on data where young adults are not oversampled. We conclude our analysis by showing that the correspondence between site evaluation and personal impact appears when such sampling occurs. The data comes from a study conducted at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) at the same time as our Knowledge Networks study. While the two studies are not identical, they have important similarities – data is collected immediately after web sites are viewed, data is collected on several sites (WWB.org, CNN.com, vote-smart.org, MSNBC.com, politics.yahoo.com) and most of the data focuses on WWB.org. Moreover, the two studies shared common questions. Chief among them are all of the site evaluation questions listed above and two of the personal impact variables "[SITE] makes me want to learn more about politics" and "[SITE] makes me more likely to talk about politics with others."

Table 4 shows that the correspondence between site evaluations and personal impact is similar in both studies. As before, we separate WWB.org responses from those

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2001: 104) explain the Vote-Smart coefficient – many people in the study were introduced to the site through it and were appreciative of the fact that it was well organized and run by a non-profit organizations (the same effect was also observed for WWB.org).

of the other sites, but for simplicity, we convert respondents' site evaluations into binary categories. We say that a respondent rates a site "AAA" if they "agree" with all three site evaluation statements. Otherwise, we classify respondents as providing a "lower" ranking. Note that in the local study, response options were limited to "agree" and "disagree."

As in the Knowledge Networks study, the local study shows that regardless of age, rating a site "AAA" corresponds to a greater personal impact than rating it "lower." In most cases, the difference between "AAA" and "lower" is large, while the difference between young and old is not. Indeed, after running significance tests comparing the means of young and old for every cell value in Table 4, we found no statistically significant differences in personal impact (again, after controlling for site evaluation) across age groups in either study.

[Table 4 here.]

Overall, Tables 3 and 4 show that if a user of any age evaluates a site as effective (i.e., providing new information quickly, easily and accurately), then that site is more likely to induce greater political interest and participation for any age group. When we pair this pattern with that identified in Table 2, we see that once young adults judge a site to be effective, it affects their political engagement no differently than other age groups, with the critical qualification that young adults judge sites differently. With respect to using news and information web sites to convey information that increases political participation and interest, our findings suggest that one-size-*does-not*-fit-all. Young adults expect different things from such web sites. If we want to engage them effectively, we must learn what their distinct expectations are.

At any moment, billions of web sites compete for the attention of Internet users. This is why simply building a news or political information web guarantees nothing in terms of effect. To make Internet-based political information more effective, we must learn more about how web sites and people interact.

Conclusion

While new opportunities can induce behavioral changes, they do not always have this effect. In the case of the Internet and youth political participation, it is easy to imagine no change occurring. Young adults, after all, are stereotyped as chronically disinterested in politics. And the Internet, particularly after the fall of many web-based entrepreneurs, is a target of widespread skepticism.

By looking not at "the Internet," but at interactions between people and web sites, we find that the new opportunities can yield increased political interest and willingness to participate. If polities really do benefit when more people are engaged, then our work suggests that something as simple as changing the design of a web site can yield important social benefits.

There are, however, different views of how the Internet will affect political participation. Some believe it will have very little effect. Others see a more sinister consequence – one in which the Internet causes the masses to desert public life (see, e.g., Sunstein 2001).

We agree that politics is no match for some of the new diversions that the Internet generates. However, it is mistaken to conclude that the Internet's role in creating new diversions makes it an unworthy venue for effective attempts to increase political participation. The Internet will be with us for the foreseeable future. Not everyone has access, but increasing numbers do. If able parties choose not to battle for Internet users'

attention, or if they ignore ways to make online public-interest efforts more effective, then the sinister consequence will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, however, scholars and practitioners focus on making political news sites more effective for young audiences, then public-spirited concerns need not lose battles for attention by default. Our results do not imply that politics will always such battles, but it does imply that special attention to this audience will produce important victories.

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	18-24 (N=70)	25-54 (N=849)	55+ (N=279)
1a. Do you ever get any kind of news online?	69	79	73
The next two questions are asked only of those who reply yes to question 1a			
1b. Did you happen to do this within the past week, or not?			
% who answered "yes" to question 1a	63	71	74
% of all respondents	43	56	54
1c. How often do you go online for this type of information?			
Everyday	13	28	29
3-5 days/week	17	24	26
1-2 days/week	23	20	25
Once/few weeks	25	19	15
Less often	19	8	4
2a. Do you ever look for news or information about politics or the presidential campaign?	16	38	37
% yes to 2a/% yes to 1a	23	48	51
The next two questions are asked only of those who reply yes to" question 2a.			
2b. Did you happen to do this within the past week, or not?			
% who answered "yes" to question 2a	55	61	67
% of all respondents	9	23	25
2c. How often do you go online for this type of information?			
Everyday	0	16	18.5
3-5days/week	36	20	27
1-2 days/week	0	26	30
Once/few weeks	55	28	19
Less often	9	10	5

Table 1. News and Political Information Internet Viewing Habits, by age.

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% responding "Yes" or "Agree."	Age 18-24				Age 25-54				Age 55+			
	WWB N=68	Pref N=18	Baseline N=17	Boost	WWB N=797	Pref N=281	Baseline N=264	Boost	WWB N=261	Pref N=91	Baseline N=74	Boost
Pre-viewing Questions												
Have you ever heard of S?	1	50	65	-15	1	41	45*	-4	1	31	26*	5
Do you ever go to S to get news and information on the presidential campaign?	0	6	6	0	1	7	4	3	0	7	4	3
Site Evaluation Questions												
I can use S to find information that I have not seen elsewhere.	94	94	69	**25**	84	78	59	**19**	81	84	79	**5**
I can use S to find information that is accurate and non-partisan.	85	94	71	**23**	75*	90	79	**11**	72*	82	71	**11**
I can use S to get the information I want quickly and easily.	87	94	41	**55**	81	84	70*	**14**	80	84	75*	**9**
Personal Impact Questions												
S makes me feel more confident about the quality of political information available on the Internet.	78	78	41	**37**	70*	73	57	**26**	64*	69	63*	**6**
S makes me want to learn more about politics	60	67	24	**43**	50	57	39	**18**	51	49	47*	**2**
S makes me more likely to talk about politics with others.	60	50	35	**15**	49	50	42	**8**	43*	44	44	**0**
S makes me more likely to vote in the November election	38	50	6	**44**	34	36	29*	**7**	35	35	36*	**-1**
S makes me more certain about who I will vote for in the presidential election.	51	56	29	**27**	50	48	37	**11**	50	50	46	**4**

Preferred sites: Vote-Smart, Yahoo, CNN, and FoxNews.
Baseline sites: I-Syndicate, PoliticalInformation, New York Times and USA Today.
Boost: Percent responding "yes" or "agree" when asked about preferred sites minus the analogous percentage when asked about baseline sites.
Starred cell entries are significantly different than those for the 18-24 year age cohort at the .05 level of significance.

Table 2. Effects of Viewing Site by Age.

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WWB	More Confident	Want to Learn More	More Likely to Talk	More Likely to Vote	More Certain
New Info	**.24* (.03)**	**.32* (.04)**	**.24* (.04)**	**.14* (.05)**	**.17* (.05)**
Quick & Easy	**.30* (.03)**	**.27* (.04)**	**.24* (.04)**	**.19* (.05)**	**.28* (.05)**
Accurate NP	**.39* (.03)**	**.20* (.04)**	**.21* (.04)**	**.27* (.04)**	**.25* (.05)**
Age18-24	.05 (.05)	.11 (.07)	.02 (.07)	.08 (.08)	-.07 (.08)
1824*newinfo	-.03 (.04)	-.03 (.06)	.05 (.06)	-.02 (.07)	.07 (.07)
1824*quick&easy	-.06 (.04)	-.06 (.05)	-.02 (.05)	-.03 (.06)	-.07 (.06)
1824*accurateNP	.08 (.04)	.00 (.05)	.00 (.05)	-.02 (.06)	.02 (.06)
NewsOL	.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)
PoliticsOL	.02 (.01)	**.09* (.02)**	**.07* (.02)**	.04 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Heard of (pre)	.12 (.13)	.20 (.16)	.17 (.17)	.16 (.19)	.21 (.19)
Visited (pre)	-.08 (.17)	-.35 (.21)	-.08 (.22)	-.30 (.25)	-.37 (.27)
Partisan	.00 (.01)	**.02* (.01)**	.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Constant	-.03 (.03)	**-.11 (.04)***	**-.09 (.04)***	-.07 (.04)	-.01 (.04)
N	1046	1047	1048	1047	1039
Adjusted R²	.47	.28	.23	.13	.17
Preferred and baseline sites	**More Confident**	**Want to Learn More**	**More Likely to Talk**	**More Likely to Vote**	**More Certain**
New Info	**.13* (.03)**	**.20* (.03)**	**.15* (.03)**	**.16* (.04)**	**.19* (.04)**
Quick & Easy	**.18* (.03)**	**.18* (.03)**	**.16* (.03)**	**.11* (.04)**	**.17* (.04)**
Accurate NP	**.27* (.03)**	**.12* (.03)**	**.17* (.03)**	**.11* (.04)**	**.09* (.04)**
Age18-24	.02 (.01)	-.12 (.13)	.01 (.13)	-.05 (.15)	-.01 (.17)
1824*newinfo	-.10 (.18)	.07 (.21)	.20 (.22)	.12 (.25)	.26 (.26)
1824*quick&easy	.16 (.10)	.19 (.11)	.06 (.12)	.16 (.13)	-.06 (.16)
1824*accurateNP	-.12 (.19)	-.09 (.21)	-.33 (.22)	-.22 (.25)	-.20 (.26)
NewsOL	.03 (.03)	.06 (.03)	.04 (.03)	-.04 (.04)	.00 (.04)
PoliticsOL	.02 (.02)	**.08* (.03)**	**.07* (.03)**	**.06* (.03)**	.05 (.03)
Heard of (pre)	.02 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.03 (.04)	-.02 (.04)
Visited (pre)	**.11* (.04)**	.04 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.01 (.05)	-.04 (.06)
Partisan	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.02 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Vote-Smart	**.11* (.04)**	**.13* (.04)**	.07 (.04)	.08 (.05)	**.21* (.06)**
Yahoo	.03 (.04)	.06(.04)	-.04 (.05)	.02 (.05)	.05 (.06)
PoliticalInfo	.06 (.04)	.04 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.07 (.05)	.10 (.06)
CNN	-.02 (.04)	-.06 (.05)	**-.14* (.05)**	.02 (.06)	.10 (.07)
Fox	.01 (.04)	.05 (.05)	.00 (.05)	.05 (.06)	**.16* (.06)**
NY Times	.01 (.04)	.02 (.05)	-.01 (.05)	-.04 (.06)	.06 (.06)
USA Today	.00 (.04)	-.03 (.05)	**-.10* (.05)**	.04 (.06)	**.14* (.06)**
Constant	.08 (.04)	-.03 (.05)	-.02 (.05)	-.06 (.06)	-.05(.07)
N	652	650	652	650	560
Adjusted R²	.40	.29	.24	.14	.17

Table 3. Personal Impact Regressions. Bold and starred coefficients are significant at .05.

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	SITE makes me more likely to talk about politics.				SITE makes me want to learn more about the election.			
18-24	WWB KN	Other KN	WWB SD	Other SD	WWB KN	Other KN	WWB SD	Other SD
AAA	**70** 38/54	**57** 12/21	**67** 86/128	**78** 148/190	**65** 35/54	**71** 15/21	**70** 90/128	**84** 160/190
Lower	**21** 3/14	**21** 3/14	**49** 62/126	**46** 71/155	**42** 6/14	**7** 1/14	**44** 55/126	**32** 49/155
25+								
AAA	**60** 392/656	**60** 246/407	**68** 13/19	**86** 18/21	**65** 423/655	**64** 259/407	**74** 14/19	**90** 19/21
Lower	**26** 102/393	**23** 55/244	**60** 12/20	**43** 9/21	**27** 106/393	**20** 49/241	**50** 10/20	**38** 8/21

Table 4. Comparison of main effect in National and Local Studies

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